

REPORT OF THE MENTAL WELLBEING TASK FORCE

Presented by Jaco van der Westhuizen

SUMMARY

The IFATCA Wellbeing Task Force was established after the Jamaica Conference by the Executive Board. The Task Force consist of a Chair and 3 members at this stage. The initial stage of the Task Force is to establish the current situation of the Member Associations wellbeing and determine the way forward for IFATCA.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Mental health and wellbeing of aviation personnel have always been a critical factor in aviation safety, however, in many instances, this did not receive the required attention from regulators and corporations for multiple reasons.
- 1.2. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic placed an additional emphasis on the reality of mental illness following extended periods of isolation. This has also spilt over into unusual work conditions and further stressors added onto aviation professionals working in confined spaces.
- 1.3. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to ICAO establishing a Mental Health and Wellbeing Work Group to discuss the challenges around the reality of mental health. This group also started the conversation around developing guidance material for States and the various industry institutions as well as emphasising the need for a mental health and wellbeing focus of aviation organisations.
- 1.4. The International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Association (IFATCA) Executive Board (EB) establishes an IFATCA Mental Wellness Task Force (MWTF) after the Conference in Jamaica. The MWTF consist of a Chair and 3 members from the different IFATCA regions they are:
 - Jaco van der Westhuizen (Chair – South Africa)
 - Bron Sanderson (Member – Australia)
 - Marc Baumgartner (Member – Switzerland)
 - Andrew LeBovidge (Member – USA)
- 1.5. The TF has a Terms of Reference (ToR) and it is on the IFATCA Website.

2. DISCUSSION

- 2.1. IFATCA was invited to nominate a representative to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) Mental Health and Wellbeing Work Group. At this stage, discussions are mostly in confidence as topics of concern are discussed and consideration is debated on how to proceed on this sensitive but important topic.
- 2.2. In the past IFATCA already recognised the impact of mental wellbeing on aviation safety but also the impact of adverse events on human performance. For example, aircraft accidents in Kenya, Ethiopia and other places in recent years led to a request for support where peer support in the form of Critical Incident Stress Management was offered to those ATCOs involved.
- 2.3. In September 2023 IFATCA was represented by Andrew LeBovidge at an ICAO Air Navigation Conference as a panel member to an ICAO Mental Health Work Group initiative. The panel discussion was formulated as a thought-leading intervention to guide and inform future discussions globally on the importance of a mental health and wellbeing focus.
- 2.4. In November 2023 IFATCA presented a paper at the International Pilot Peer Assist Coalition (IPPAC) conference to provide the international audience on peer support with a view of how such support is structured, offered, and experienced from an Air Traffic Controller Officer (ATCO) point of view. This presentation had limited data and could represent the view of 6 countries. Other disciplines within aviation also presented at this conference, which has led to a name change for future conferences and global industry collaboration. The name changed to International Peer Assist Aviation Coalition (IPAAC).
- 2.5. The IFATCA Wellbeing Task Force is setting out various activities to be considered to support and enhance mental wellbeing amongst Member Associations (MAs). These activities include:
 - 2.5.1. Participating in the IFATCA Mental Wellbeing survey that is set to determine the current state of peer support across countries and MAs.
 - 2.5.2. Once a basic understanding of peer support is gathered, further short follow-up surveys will be hosted with more detailed questions about existing programs and how lessons learnt can be shared.
 - 2.5.3. IFATCA has been offered a separate conference stream at the IPAAC conference in Japan hosted from 5 to 7 November 2024 whereby particular discussions on ATCO peer support can be discussed in detail. Nominations for participation and themes for discussion from MAs will be appreciated.
 - 2.5.4. Peer support is but one part of mental health and wellbeing and there is a need for an educational element teaching on mental wellbeing. Therefore, printed, or electronic educational marketing material may be developed by the Task Force and MAs are welcome to share existing material that they have used to date that can also be shared with other MAs or at least considered content or design ideas.

- 2.5.5. Educational training sessions are considered, depending on the needs of MAs, whereby online webinars may be hosted to share tools and good practices for the mental wellbeing of ATCOs.
 - 2.5.6. Enabling a peer support capability within an MA or a region is another consideration at present, whereby the resources can be sought to conduct training for peers and/or ensure the structure is set up for such training and peer support provision.
 - 2.5.7. At the IPPAC conference contact was made with Dr William Hoffman, a neurologist from Dakota University who is involved with pilot mental health research. He has conducted several research studies on healthcare avoidance behaviour due to a fear of loss of flying status or medical licensing. IFATCA is considering partnering with him to conduct similar research amongst ATCO communities across the globe. Their only requirement is to have a large sample (100s to 1000s of ATCO). Your consideration of this opportunity and possible participation is appreciated.
- 2.6. The list of planned activities is not exhaustive and subject to MA needs.
 - 2.7. It is not enough to remain reactive in our global approach towards mental wellbeing for ATCOs. Although this support element is necessary, it can be sensible to adopt a salutogenic approach (preventative health actions) whereby the maintenance of mental wellbeing is prioritized.
 - 2.8. Prioritisation may involve education on what mental health is and how to maintain an acceptable healthy state. Moreover, empowering ATCOs to be able to know and identify the instances through self-identification of at-risk factors or scenarios and seek help where necessary before adverse events impact their medical licensing.
 - 2.9. Destigmatising ATCOs for raising their hands to ask for support should be a primary focus of MAs in terms of mental wellbeing. Such an act can be recognised as an act of safety!

3. CONCLUSION

- 3.1. MAs should promote mental wellbeing amongst their members and report on anomalies and success of local practices and IFATCA-led interventions.
- 3.2. MAs should partake in the interventions planned by the IFATCA Mental Wellbeing Task Force.
- 3.3. MAs should advise the Task Force on particular needs they may have that can become a focus for the Task Force.

4. DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1. It is recommended that this paper be accepted as information.

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